



**Finding  
Jesus**

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## **Supplemental findings for those aged 18–24**

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# Introduction

We were interested to know how far the faith journeys of very young adults (sometimes called Gen Z) compared to those of older people meeting Jesus. When we looked closely at the answers given by the 47 respondents aged 18–24 we found some fascinating insights.

This document is a supplement to the main *Finding Jesus* report. It won't repeat everything in that. Instead it contains some of the variations that emerged from responses given by those youngest participants. It highlights some interesting patterns that those ministering to that age group might like to consider.

## Initial reflections

### **1. The first striking thing was that half were men.**

Traditionally across all religions and generations, women outnumber men 2:1. Anecdotally, and according to recent studies, interest in religion among young men is on the rise. So although this is a small sample, it appears to confirm what we are hearing about young men seeking meaning and finding Jesus.

### **2. Secondly, there was considerable confusion about matters of faith prior to their deciding to follow Jesus.**

Participants regularly selected more than one way of describing their beliefs.

- 17% were atheist
- 26% agnostic
- 26% “disinterested in matters of faith”

This is in line with the fact that 70% of those under 30 in the UK describe themselves as having no faith (nones). However, despite this, 43% self-identified as “cultural Christians”.

This was perplexing, but as we looked more closely, their background shed some light. Half of these very young adults had Christian parents or had attended Sunday school, and 43% had other relatives with Christian faith. It seems that half were ‘prodigals’ who had rejected the faith of their upbringing but returned to it as they became adults. Despite their confusion over terms or even beliefs, this is an encouragement to Christian families, children and youth workers. At least some of those young people they see leave faith behind are not gone forever but will find Jesus in a meaningful way for themselves in due course.

# What prompted their interest in Jesus?

## What prompted you to begin exploring Christian faith?

(Select any that apply)



Responses to this question show what an intense and demanding season of life 18–24 can be. Nearly half said “I needed help” (47%) and 45% cited difficult experiences.

It is also a well-recognised season for exploration of identity, purpose and worldview. Unsurprisingly, “I was looking for meaning” (38%) and “intellectual/philosophical curiosity” (28%) were also high.

These, combined with “seeing the impact of Christian faith on someone I know” (38%), “a Christian spoke to me about their faith” (30%), and “a spiritual experience” (30%) illustrate two things: one, the importance of friendships in this life stage; and two, their pragmatism. Very young adults are strongly influenced by their peers, and seeing their sincere faith in action is very influential. Similarly, spiritual experiences make faith real. In a world of hype and spin, young adults want a faith that will actually help and provide answers to deep questions. When they witness or experience that, faith takes on genuine meaning and provides clarity in their spiritual confusion. For example, one participant said, “My sister had become a Christian and it had improved her life drastically. I had a conversation with her and after I started doing the Bible in one year app.”



# What was challenging about the journey to faith in Jesus?

Overwhelmingly, these very young adults described their exploration of Christianity as both “challenging” (55%) and “life giving” (49%). They were also more likely to describe it as “surprising” and “satisfying”, but significantly less “encouraging” than older people. It was clear that exploring faith was a real wrestle for them.

## What things were challenges for you?

(Select any that apply)



It seems that as society moves further from a Christian heritage, theological questions, be they difficult aspects of Christian belief (53%), understanding the Bible (43%) and even the existence of God (32%), are a challenge for very young adults. Both for the prodigals and those with no faith background there is serious wrestling to be done.

Of course, tensions between the ethics and lifestyle of secular liberalism and being a disciple of Jesus are experienced across all age ranges. However, they are acute for young people raised in a hyper-individualistic environment and encouraged to 'be true to yourself', with the mantra of 'You do you!' – 43% of them struggled with the challenge of changing their lifestyle, and the same number that they could be forgiven. We need to recognise that coming to faith is a significant act of resistance against that secular individualism.

Finally, being concerned about what people might think of them is a normal developmental pressure for very young adults, but can be compounded by anxiety about being associated with Christianity. A quarter of these youngest participants cited the poor behaviour of Christians as a serious problem for them. Undoubtedly, events in their Christian childhood had disillusioned some. However, wider societal negativity towards religion, plus widely reported failings in the church, appear to have impacted the views of others.

# What helped as they explored Christian faith?

On a positive note, not one of the 47 said they had lacked support as they explored faith and a quarter cited “Christian events other than church” as having played an important role. This is an encouragement to those involved in student and young adult ministry that young Christians seem to be doing a good job supporting their friends in their faith journey, and that events specifically targeted at that age group genuinely help.

Many of the other factors that had helped them were similar to older people in the wider sample: “attending church in person” (57%), “reading the Bible” (49%), “attending a course or small group” (40%) and “spiritual experiences” (38%).

## What was helpful as you explored Christian faith?

(Select any that apply)



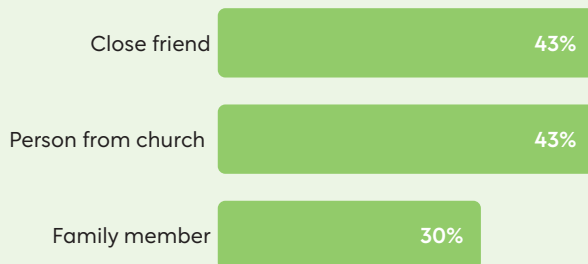
However, it was striking that “the hospitality, generosity or service of Christians” was cited by 51% (compared to 38% overall). Despite their scepticism, when Christians are warm and generous, offer community and live out their faith, young adults are impressed by that authenticity. Having grown up cynical of leadership and institutions, in a world of fake news, influencers and abuses of power, Gen Z are hungry for people who are sincere in wanting to live out the gospel of Jesus by blessing others. One participant explained, “A lady from church really demonstrated living out the Christian life in a way that was so joyful and hopeful. She left a real impact on me through her generosity by offering me some counselling and by her interest in my life.” Another summed up, “The church leader allowed me to ask any questions I had, introduced me to the church community, and welcomed me into his family as an ‘extended member’.” Time, hospitality and sacrificial generosity communicate powerfully to sceptical young adults.



# Who helped most and what did they do?

## Who particularly helped in your faith journey?

(Select all that apply)



It's no surprise that close friends were top of the list of those who had helped them (43%). Peers are typically the greatest influence on young adults as they form an identity independent of their family. Many said things like "A close friend helped me with questions and was always encouraging me with events and invitations" or "One friend was very good at loving me whilst also not pushing me to be what I was not. They let me process the journey at my own pace and were there for me along the way." Clearly, equipping young Christians to play this role in other people's journeys is a positive step churches and student/young adult ministries can take. It's not about them having all the answers, or everything sorted; it's about them being good friends who are willing to give time to support people as they wrestle with questions of faith.

A similar number (43%) also cited people at church. Typically these were older believers who made time and space for them. Friendship with older Christians is well documented as positive for young adults' faith. Some were church leaders, but not all. It was more a case of older people simply being genuinely interested. One explained, "The first time I came to church the local student pastor introduced himself to me, asked me about my story and gave me a Bible. I felt seen and cared for even as a stranger to him." Again, encouraging older believers to engage with and express interest in young adults is something churches can actively pursue. Feeling seen and cared for mirrors God's love in a tangible way to those wrestling with whether He (and the church) can be trusted.

However, it was striking how far family members did play a part in young participants coming to (or back to) faith; 30% identified a family member as



significant. Technology means that many young adults are in far more regular contact with their families than was formerly the case and they cited siblings, parents and grandparents as influential. For example, “My brother helped. While he is still finding his faith and his path with Christ, having conversations about theology and our spiritual experiences has been edifying.” Or, “My great grandmother [influenced me]. Seeing her excited to be with Jesus for eternity was particularly encouraging for my faith.” Another said, “I feel that my grandparents and mum were probably praying for me a lot. God found me in my suffering, where I felt like I didn’t know what to do.” Others acknowledged the Christian foundation they had been given: “My parents showed me a great example of a consistent and dedicated obedience to the Lord all my life.” Or, “My mum [was most influential] because she has set me up foundationally to know God as a personable being that loves me and I can have a relationship with. I could see the good that she was doing with her life and how she dealt with things living as a Christian.”

This is a real encouragement for families whose children have rejected Christian faith. Just to keep living a life of discipleship, demonstrating that in real terms, and to keep praying gives a long-term witness that can impact the prodigals more than we think. Young adults have to find a meaningful faith of their own. But when life gets difficult, many still lean on the support of their families. That influence may be more significant than people realise.

## What finally prompted them to make the decision to follow Jesus?

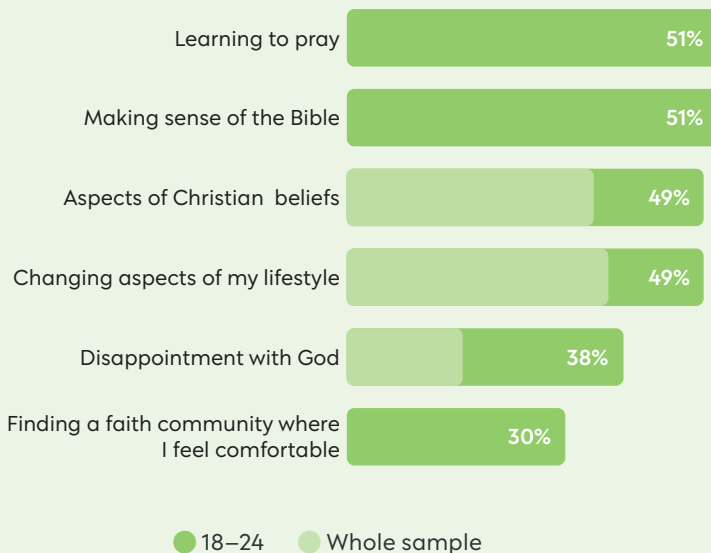
In many ways these very young adults followed a similar pattern to older people. Given that they could select up to three factors, the most common reason they gave was “an experience of God” (45%). This was followed by the impact of “reading the Bible” (26%).

However, there were some things that were unique to them. They were twice as likely to select “It felt like the right thing to do” (23%) and also “It made intellectual sense” (19%). It is clear that there are both emotional or experiential factors and intellectual reflection going on for them; both tangible experiences of God and cognitive wrestling with apologetics and scripture. In other words, they have the inclination to be worshippers in both Spirit and truth.

This was also shown by their answers to the question “What one or two things most drew you to the gospel?” Although being loved by Jesus was an important factor (45%), as was “I could have hope and purpose for this life and beyond” (49%), it was striking (and something of a surprise) that half of 18–24s said, “the gospel is true, profound and beautiful” was crucial to them. 49% selected this, as opposed to 34% of the overall sample. It seems that relativism – ‘That’s your truth not my truth’ – is on the wane, and absolute truth is important to Gen Z. We speculate that in a world of fake news, conspiracy theories and misinformation, the historical truth of the person of Jesus is deeply attractive to young adults trying to work out who and what they can trust. The impact of this on how we present the gospel and preach from scripture should not be underestimated. As one participant explained, he had come to faith because a friend “showed me that it was possible to have an intellectually honest faith. They sent resources explaining the evidence for Christianity.”

# Since coming to faith

## What has been challenging since coming to faith?



As the chart above shows, the two most common challenges for young adults – “learning to pray” (51%) and “making sense of the Bible” (51%) were the same as older respondents. But “aspects of Christian beliefs (eg suffering, hell, other religions, sexual ethics etc)” and “changing aspects of my lifestyle” were significantly higher. The cultural shift from secular liberalism to discipleship of Jesus continues to be a wrestle after they have made a decision to follow Him, and nearly a third had found it tricky to find a church where they felt comfortable.

Clearly, it’s important that as well as being hospitable, churches continue to provide opportunities for discussion, and the voicing of questions and doubts, after young adults have come to faith. Research has shown that often young adults don’t know if it’s OK to ask questions in church, and it seems likely that this is part of what makes finding a faith community tricky for them.

Related to this was the finding that nearly four in ten (38%) said they had experienced significant “disappointment with God” early in their discipleship. This included unanswered prayer and unmet expectations. Of course, this raises the

question of what their expectations were and what had been communicated to them prior to coming to faith. However, it also means that places to talk honestly about those things and learn how to make sense of them are crucially important. Creating a culture where thinking is encouraged, disagreement is graciously modelled, and things are explored and explained, not just assumed, would support the journey of all believers, not just young converts!

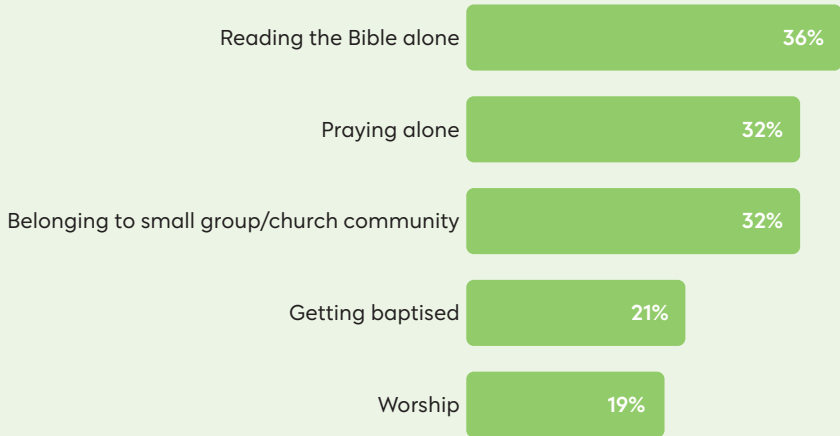
Finally, young adults are also going to need support to make lifestyle changes. It's such a culture shift to enter the kingdom of God, especially for those without a faith background. Those who were interviewed spoke about the isolation they experienced as friends continued to drink and party as they once had, and how important church community had been as a result. Helping young adults work out what it means to live as a disciple of Jesus needs to come in the form of patient, sincere relationship from peers and mentors who will help them to own lifestyle choices and changes, not just feel that they have been imposed.

## What had helped most?

Finally, the one or two things that helped these very young adults most at the start of their faith journey mirrored the wider sample.

### What helped most as you explored Christian faith?

(select one or two that were most significant)





Clearly, it is important that churches not only create space for discussion and faith community but also help new disciples learn how to engage with God directly since reading scripture (36%) and praying alone (32%) are so significant. We shouldn't take for granted that secular young adults have any idea of how to pray or make sense of the Bible. Since direct engagement with God is so significant for them, it needs to be a priority to help them begin that journey immediately. It may be that the prodigals have a better idea (or have at least witnessed others doing these things in their childhood) but since just 10% of young adults in the UK identify as Christians we need to assume nothing, and start from scratch with introducing them to these important spiritual practices.

## Final reflections

We are really excited by what we are hearing anecdotally about the engagement of Gen Z with Jesus, especially among students. The recent Bible Society publication *The Quiet Revival* makes similar observations. It really does seem that something is happening and the Holy Spirit is drawing them to Christ. There are prodigals returning home, and there are secular young men and women having supernatural experiences, opening the Bible for the first time and asking friends about their faith. Of course, this is a small sample, but it gives us some insights into the joys and challenges they face in finding Jesus and some food for thought about how we might be intentional about supporting them to become lifelong disciples of Jesus.



# Next steps

## Join the Evangelical Alliance

**The Evangelical Alliance is made up of hundreds of organisations, thousands of churches and tens of thousands of individuals, joined together for the sake of the gospel. Representing our members since 1846, the Evangelical Alliance is the oldest and largest evangelical unity movement in the UK.**

United in mission and voice, we exist to serve and strengthen the work of the church in our communities and throughout society. Highlighting the significant opportunities and challenges facing the church today, we work together to resource Christians so that they are able to act upon their faith in Jesus and to speak up for the gospel, justice and freedom in their areas of influence.

Working across the UK, with offices in London, Cardiff, Stockport, Glasgow and Belfast, our members come together from across denominations, locations, age groups and ethnicities, all sharing a passion to know Jesus and make Him known.



As a membership organisation, the strength of our voice in government depends on how many individual members we have. Join us today and help us speak up on the issues that matter.

[eauk.org/joinus](http://eauk.org/joinus)

## Good News People

**Good News People is a project from the Evangelical Alliance to help us live as people of hope and stand firm on biblical truth.**

Packed with with astonishing and encouraging stories of God on the move, this suite of resources aims to encourage us with what God is doing and ask how we live in light of the rapidly changing world around us.

The cultural sands are shifting faster than ever before. What are the postures we need to hold as Christians in the days ahead? What will a thriving, growing church look like in the years to come?

We are good news people in a bad news world.

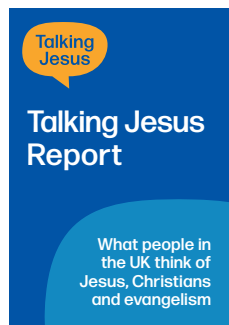
To find out more about this initiative, get hold of the book, listen to the podcast and access the resources, visit [goodnewspeople.church](http://goodnewspeople.church)

## More research from the Evangelical Alliance

We believe good research gives us helpful insight into where God is at work and informs and inspires best practice in His church. *Finding Jesus* is one of a number of studies that we are engaged in to better understand the ever-changing landscape. For further insight see:

### ***Talking Jesus***

A research piece born out of a six-way partnership mapping the state of faith across the UK. Studies of thousands of UK adults, which ask them about their perceptions of Jesus, the church and Christians, as well as practising Christians' experiences of sharing their faith. [talkingjesus.org](https://talkingjesus.org)



### ***Changing Church***

A regular survey of the membership of evangelical churches that studies discipleship, evangelism, attendance and giving habits amongst leaders and everyday Christians. [eauk.org/changing-church](https://eauk.org/changing-church)

**To keep up to date with these regular research pieces  
and more visit [eauk.org/great-commission](https://eauk.org/great-commission)**

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